

Teams have become the latest management obsession. They're the corporate equivalent of a Visa card: they're everywhere you want to be.

Trouble is that despite their vast presence, teams rarely achieve breakthrough results. Instead, they sink to the level of the weakest performer. The fault lies not with the team or its members, but with those who took a group of individuals, charged them with improbable goals, staffed them with uninspired leadership and expected them to function as a team. Such companies succeed only in putting the "fun" back into dysfunctional.

Contrast that to a well-oiled and disciplined team, one in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Such groups allow members to achieve results far beyond their individual abilities. The irony is that when the needs of the group take priority, the needs of the individual actually are enhanced.

High performance teams do not result from spontaneous combustion. They are grown, nurtured and exercised. It takes a lot of hard work and skill to blend the different personalities, abilities and agendas into a cohesive unit willing to work for a common goal.

Define the need. What is the large, desired outcome? What do you want to improve? Eliminate? Change? Don't be afraid to dream big. But resist the temptation to handcuff the team by writing a detailed prescription in advance of the diagnosis. The vision, properly articulated, will be the engine that drives and inspires the team. It will determine who should be on the team, what resources are needed, how quickly a conclusion must be reached, what falls within the scope of the team and how success will be measured and rewarded.

Recruit the right people. Now you have to find the talent that is willing to commit to your vision with missionary-like zeal. Choose members who represent a wide range of backgrounds, skills and abilities. Try to limit participation to three to five members. Any more and each individual's contribution will be compromised. Also, look to imbue your team with a wide mix of cultural and professional viewpoints. Such diversity should give life to ideas and opinions that might not otherwise have been aired.

Shared values. Not only must team members embrace your mission, they must share your values. Effective teams demand close collaboration, trust, honesty, passion and genuine appreciation for each member's contributions. To develop that value system, challenge the team to learn more independently. Develop common goals. Goals should be formalized through a written charter – an agreement that clearly states what the team wants to accomplish, why its goals are important and how the team will work together to achieve the desired outcome. Consider an off-site retreat, free from the routine pressures of the office, to set the goals. Or consider a third-party administrator whose sole purpose is to guide and lead the team with no other agenda.

Set ground rules. Make sure team members understand why the team exists and know the roles each member plays. They need to know how decisions will be made, how to deal with conflict, how to communicate and how results will be measured. The success of the team depends upon creating an environment in which team members openly contribute ideas while recognizing and respecting the differences in others. Communicate, communicate, communicate. Communication is more than talking; it's about listening intently, and asking questions to get clarification.

Keep score. A team can't perform if it doesn't know what it's doing. There must be a commitment to constant improvement. To accomplish that, you have to measure performance. Don't wait until the end of the year to address performance. Feedback should be immediate.

Reward. Even though their contributions may not be exactly equal, it's important to recognize the team's efforts. Acknowledge individual achievement during group meetings and compliment the team as a whole on working well together. People repeat performance that garners reward and recognition. When you focus on the positive, you develop the habit of doing things right.

Trust the team process. Nothing undermines a team faster than for their moves to be trumped. Teams must be empowered to achieve the results, without fear of being overridden by the "boss"

Follow these guidelines and you're well on your way to creating a high performance team. Develop the basic skills and a game plan and stick to it.

For more information on Team Building and Sales Coaching, please feel free to contact Maria Novak, owner of Marketing Solutions & Business Development.

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